TRACY 168

I started as an artist. I was like a child prodigy. I was on Johnny Carson as a child, just for some reason something would happen to me, I was always in the limelight. Like the President of the United States wrote me a letter actually I have letters to me from two presidents: Nixon and Johnson. Nixon wrote it himself, and I actually wound up working with Nixon before he died, because his grand kids used to swim in my church. And he would come and watch them. So that's how I met him.

I'm originally from Manhattan, 168th street, I'm a real true New Yorker, My father was with the Riffs, like the Riffs and the Jets. Westside Story was based on the area where my family lived. My mother went to school with George Carlin. We all used to hang out with the guys the French Connection was about. But I lived in the Bronx, near Bronx Zoo and Yankee Stadium. I used to play in the cages with the animals as a kid. I was a wild kid. You know, you used to watch Tarzan, and that would make you want to fight with the alligators. Back then, they used to have the animals at the first fence, so when you snuck in, the next thing you know you're in a wolves' cage or something. So you would just run. I think it killed one kid, because kids would get caught. I fought with the alligator, he looked like he was on drugs. Fucked with the elephants, punched em in the trunk. But I was almost killed by a penguin. I couldn't see the penguins' cage. My brother tied me by the feet and lowered me so I could see into the cage with the penguin, and with my luck, the penguin was right there

and I'm upside down, mind you, so I'm looking directly in his face, and he puffed up real big, and my brother was calling to me asking if I could see anything but you can't say a word, because I'm like the vicious penguin's gonna kill me, so I just stood there waiting and hoping my brother was gonna save me.

I grew up in a mixed family Puerto Rican and Irish.

Describe your reactions to seeing graffiti and tagging in public places for the first time.

I invented the fucking shit. The first time I saw it was when I did it. Me and my friend FJC4 were in Queens, we just took a marker out, it must have been 1969, we were dropping off some legal papers. His father was a lawyer. He was German and Japanese. His brother became my partner later. We took a tag and we never thought we'd see it again but on the way back we caught the same train and it already had some other writing next to it, it was like a communication!

We was in the middle of street gang wars. At the time, New York was overwhelmed by gangs. We had the Vietnam vets coming back, all pumped up. We had the war protestors. And we had the street gangs. New York city was all dark. This thing grew so fast into an art form it was a way for us to express what we felt because it was a scary world at the moment. It was like the dawn of a new era of madness. You had all those heroes from the war

coming home, and we were told by our parents to stay clear of them because they were on methadone and dope, so all our heroes were treated like the plague. And junkies and gangs were running rampant. It was all negative shit going on. I lived right behind Yankee stadium.

Once I tagged that train, that was it and once I saw it again I was in shock. I never hung out with just one kind of person‹I hung out with all kinds of people, we wasn't into too many whites or too many one color, and I didn't want to join any gangs. I ended up wearing the colors of one gang for like a week, the Bronx reapers, they had the best colors ever. I'm not a gang person. I'm a leader not a follower. I was an artist, so I did it for the colors. I did their colors. So I could travel around anywhere. I painted the backs of their jackets. I was into making clothes back then, as well as painting, I designed my own clothes. All the hip-hop shit you see now, I'm one of the guys who invented that shit. I designed clothes all those years. We grew up in a real latin-based, Spanish area. You didn't have a lot of money but you had a lot of imagination to make up for that. I'm an innovator, never an imitator. I invent things to keep my mind occupied. Like I said I went to the zoo to fight with the animals. I went to the Yankee stadium and fucked around with Mickey Mantle. I'm an adventurer.

The thing with this art form is it grew very quickly. And I was actually one of the few guys out there at the beginning who was also an artist. I had a skill with the spray can and it gave me the power to be one of the best. I saw a lot of masters. You know what they called us? Stone Soup. Because this art form has knocked down all

the bigotry in the world. And now they brought it back to 'divide and conquer.' But back then we would get together and we would zone out. You could spent hours and you're alongside people from any culture. Every culture contributed a certain technique to this art form. Latin, Chinese, Korean, whatever, everybody in the world would bring some thing of themselves and put it into the big giant soup of art. And this is the first time an art form was created, spur of the moment. And we were writing on metal with 600 volts running through it. So you could die at any moment. And we were painting together, all these cultures, not even thinking of fighting. We were at the height of the most prejudiced, territorial, colored thing ever in New York City, meanwhile, we're all standing up like diplomats painting together, with every culture. It was created with a lot of love. You can't destroy love. Love is the most powerful source in the world it breaks down walls. That's why it's still here. It was based on love. It wasn't just graffiti. It was just us putting paint and colors on the walls of subways. I had a friend named RC 162, and he fell of the train and was killed when he was with me. He must have been about eleven. This wasn't like Nintendo. This was real life. You make a mistake, you're dead. This was an art form based on living on the edge. Because when you got hurt, you died. It wasn't like some little safe place in a studio behind a museum. We created an art form in the most dangerous place in the world and it turned beautiful, quick. It was like jazz. It was a moment stuck in time, you can never be in the moment again, that moment is locked forever. It was a feeling from the soul and the heart and you can never get that moment again, it's locked in time forever.

I started during murals. I felt shunned from the art world a little bit because I was a very radical, noise-making pain in the neck. When I wasn't doing trains, I started doing murals. I always felt like graffiti stopped in 1976, because it changed. I was already a master. Nobody could catch me. There are four skills in this life. Besides love, you gotta be able to run fast, fight and rack up spray paint. You also need the ability to draw, because otherwise, why do it? And you gotta be able to write your name all over the place. I was one of the first all city kings, I wrote my name all over New York City.

I was lucky to be able to write with some of the best writers that ever existed, people like PRO SOUL 165, Chi Chi 133, one of the biggest Brooklyn writers was also my partner. I wrote with the best with each borough: you had SPIN form Brooklyn. Fab 5 Freddy claimed to be Spin when he met me, not
knowing that I knew Spin. There's a lot of fakes in the art world. A lot of writers would approach me not knowing that I knew everybody. I'm the guy who tells you if you're really you, in this art world. You had STICTH 1 and SNAKE 1, you had PHASE 2, LEE 163, he had the most original tag, almost, SUPER KOOL 223, STAY HIGH 149, then you had SUNNY 107, CHECKER 170. I could go on with the names of so many writers. But KINDO and me came to an agreement to make a bicenntenial, so I wrote God Bless America for the bicenntenial, I did three pieces in Red, White and Blue, and it was so beautiful like an American flag. See, we're not anti society. We're anti asshole. And the society was giving us shit. I think Ford at the time was

giving New York City shit. But I'm not a politician. I'm just an artist. My only goal was to create something beautiful, I painted three guys the drummer, the guy with the flute, and the guy with the flag, marching for America with a scroll about what it meant to be American. And it was so beautiful that the MTA hid it. Cause they couldn't let nobody know that we love America. It was me, Tab, KINDO and JAY, and I did two whole train cars with them holding me up. It takes a lot of paint. It was on the 2 and the 5 train. And they immediately painted over it. That was more or less them giving us shit.

The next move I did was, I started writing the governors' and the mayors names on the train for money. My first client was a guy named Wolf D. Logoswky and he lived at one Fifth Avenue and I went up to his penthouse and he gave me some money to write his name on the train. Next thing the news put me on TV and I'm embarrassing the whole MTA because I was writing on the trains for dough. Governor Carey, Mayor Beam were all pissed off--and I'm standing there painting names on the train. I would charge $25 to do it, but then I would charge them a hundred for the paint and another hundred for the film developing, so it turned out to be $225. But I didn't even have to do it, cause they paid me up front and I'm a graffiti writer so it was like, what are you gonna do? Call the cops. I had one cop try to call me and ask me to paint his name on the biggest police station out in Queens, but I'm smart. I'm a master booster. I can't get into all the stuff I did. I robbed from the rich and gave for the poor. I'm a Robin Hood guy.

When I was painting, I did murals, and I ran into some

creepy bastards. But I was brought up correctly, with balls. And I could fight my ass off, I would knock anybody's head off. I used to punch people and knock their heads off. I had a dangerous brother. And so that made it easy to fight. I used to grow up as a kid and we'd fight grown men. I never even knew it was real. Because I didn't feel nothing. So I used to have to stop and ask them is this a real fight? That's how good I fought.

I started building murals. I worked for a magazine called Black New York Illustrated, this was 1978, I moved next to Edgar Allen Poe in Poe Park on the Concourse in the Bronx, where Batman was invented in 1927. I was in between worlds. I never really was home. There was always something in the house that I'd rather be outdoors. My home was the whole city.

When people made that TURK 182 movie I felt like that was my life. I was always fucking nuts like that. The whole thing is to have respect in this art form. The whole idea was to help people, or send a message about what I felt or what the neighborhood felt. I picked up energies off people of what they felt and I would express it in my art. The only time we're not censored by the media is when were riding on the train. This is the first time we were speaking real words from the people, which is what America's all about.

I started doing murals to try to save children from the drugs and the guns. I keep evolving to another level.

I been in museums for 20 years but to me it doesn't mean anything. It's just as good as painting the trains. As long as

you don't lose the art form itself, it's good. There's always been fighting in it. But we used to have more love than there is today because once you start doing something for cash it sort of loses something. Even when I was writing people's names on trains for dough, it was like a goof; it wasn't really about the money, it was a goof. I wanted to let everyone see their name on the trains even down in Manhattan, cause even the rich guy got a chance to say what he felt and see it on the train. Everybody gets theirs. No one's immune. Everybody gets upset about shit.

I happened to be one of the masters, I taught a lot of the best writers, like KING 2 and P.NUT 2. You can see my name on the door of the train if you watch the opening of 'Welcome Back Kotter.' It says TRACY on the door of the subway right next to P.NUT 2.

Tell me about the issue of writers taking pride in tagging hard to access places--how important was/is that?

That's one of the major points, one of the greatest parts of this. First of all, I gotta admit I was an adrenalin junky and a dare devil. I had to see the grim reaper every day, otherwise I didn't feel like I was alive. Most of the time, you had to climb on some ledge to get to some crazy spot that no one else would dare to try, to get your name up there. It was the challenge of, how dare you think I can't do it? I'll do it just to show you I can.

Is grafitti still alive today and is it good?

Today, it's commercialized too much but years ago, I pushed people to try to make some dough and they would never let it happen. Most of those guys today are dead and a lot of the guys who are cashing in today never really did shit. But that's okay as long as it gets back to the people. The problem I have with guys like Grandmaster Flash and Herc and Russell Simmons and all these hip-hop guys is, they made money but does it ever go back into the community? I don't know.

Do you think graffiti presaged the birth of hip-hop and how?

Hip-hop, the word, was created later but the music started in the early 70s. I started wildstyle. It was a way of life, like living on the edge. I hung out with guys who sang and rapped on the trains. I'm the roots of the tree and it branched off into other stuff. That was the beginning. It's beautiful that it's still alive. But now the truth is getting destroyed because the truth is scary. They can't control what I live like. That's where you get the wildstyle from. Wild means untamed and style means I have class. So I was like an animal but with respect. And they used that word for the hip-hop movie and they thought it was a saying that was all over the street but it was just me and my crew, running rampant all over the streets. It was the way we lived. I just happened to coin the term wildstyle. I know what it means because I invented it. For someone to try to define it is bullshit, because it's me. Don't tell me

what I'm doing. I know what I'm doing.

**What do you think of the current state of graffiti where people use solvents
and acids to etch graffiti proof surfaces?**

That's bullshit. In fact, the Transit Authority called me up and and asked me what I think, they said, should we use glass or plastic windows? I saved them a billion dollars. The writers know all the answers. And safety. We probably made the world the safest place. Because the train tunnels? I know them inside out. As crazy as it sounds, I'm still American, this is still my country, and we got our own little world down there, and before I see anybody do anything down there, I'll stop that. As far as using cameras down there, that's bullshit. As far as security, how much is detecting and how much is surveillance? Welcome to the new world. This is big brother!

Describe the feeling of re-bombing a freshly painted train?

I love art, I draw all the time, I have so much art. You ever see Indiana Jones at the end? That's me. I have a lot of art, early photos form the beginning till now, 125 books, and photos and videotapes of every show I was on, from 60 minutes to 20/20 to a Current Affair. I made the front page of the New York Times as a little kid for writing. It's funny. I made the front page for doing the murals. I started doing the murals and flipping everybody out and they

started putting me on the cover as an anti graffiti guy but they didn't realize I was just painting over the slop. There's a time and a place for graffiti but if it starts getting sloppy I'll paint something beautiful over it, especially if it's in my neighborhood. You don't shit where you eat. That's the rules, and I would know. I made them up.

In April 1977, we had the Son of Sam running rampant, the black out, and me writing on the trains for money. And at the height of all the insanity, I went to a party once where the governor and mayor were, and I actually sat down and had dinner with them. They had no idea who I was. And they asked me, who are you? I said security. Then the secret service came up and grabbed me and they said you're not security. I said only kidding, but I sat there for 15 minutes with the mayor and the governor before you figured it out, and I know you don't want to put that in the paper. So they let me go.

We changed the whole world in '77. What happened after the blackouts, because they started using roll down gates because all the windows were busted from the looting. So it was like we were living in some mad-looking place, when the gates came down because it was dark and weird so we painted up the gates to make it like a bright fun happy place and make it beautiful. That was the beginning of another era.

And then it changed again. The next thing was they poured all the drugs and guns into New York, and most of the guys that we knew dropped. And these new people came in, crack, dope and angel dust and a lot of guns and

a lot of people fighting for territories. It was kinda crazy. A lot of my friends died 25 to 50 years. The funny thing is, a lot of my old crew is getting out this year, because 25 to 30 years passed so their life sentences are over. So I got my old crew back.

And then I also hung out with Jimmy Breslin, a lot of professors and geniuses. My woman used to be an actress. I was there when they filmed the movie Fame. So that was part of graffiti too. Everybody wanted to be a writer. Or was. Remember Freddy Prinze wrote graffiti. A lot of these big stars wrote. Like Larry Fishburne.